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AN OBSCURE PASSAGE IN DANTE'S "PURGATORY"

Sicura, quasi rocca in alto monte,
Seder sopr' esso una puttana sciolta
M' apparve con le ciglia intorno pronte:
E, come perchè non gli fosse tolta,
Vidi di costa a lei dritto un gigante,
E baciavansi insieme alcuna volta.
Ma, *perchè l' occhio cupido e vagante*
A me rivolse, quel feroce drudo
La flagellò dal capo infin le piante.
Poi, di sospetto pieno e d'ira crudo,
Disciolse il mostro, e trassel per la selva
Tanto, che sol di lei mi fece scudo
Alla puttana ed alla nuova belva.

—*Purg.*, xxxii, 148-60.

The general meaning of this passage may be fairly considered as accepted. The harlot seated upon the car of the church is the degenerate papacy (or a special pope), and the giant typifies the kings of France (or a special king). They caress each other in forming alliances. But when the harlot turns her eyes on Dante, her fierce lover scourges her, and afterward drags her away through the wood from out Dante's sight. This latter is also commonly accepted as indicating the removal of the seat of the papacy to Avignon.

The disagreement in interpretation comes in the meaning of the harlot turning her eyes on Dante. Mr. Norton, in the note to this passage in the last edition of his translation, says: "The meaning . . . is obscure, and no satisfactory interpretation of it has been proposed;" and Dr. Moore in his *Studies*¹ passes over the phrase.

Leaving out of consideration the hopelessly indeterminate solutions, the explanations offered may be brought into three divisions; viz., that the papacy was looking longingly toward (a) men of worth, or the Christian people; (b) the Italian people; (c) the other rulers, his (Philip's) enemies, or the Ghibellines.

¹ Vol. III, pp. 208, 209.

The first two explanations do not satisfy us on account of their vagueness. Philip could hardly object to the pope's having to do with honorable men or Christian peoples, as long as this did not interfere with his own plans. Still more could the people of Italy be expected to draw the pope's attention; and if Philip were sure of the pope, he would hardly be likely to object to this. Our dissatisfaction with the previous explanations loses much of its strength when applied to the third class. Philip's (or the French) plans would be seriously hindered if the papacy were to turn toward the other princes, his enemies, the Ghibellines. But Dante expressly says *a me*, and he never takes himself elsewhere as the representative of princes. Still here he does make himself enter into the allegory; so we must find some meaning for the personal element introduced, and yet one which shall be in consonance with the historical bearing of the passage in question.

The whole allusion is evidently a political one. Now, what was Dante's position? He was never against the theoretical papacy, but only against the debased and debauched popes of his times. He was fiercely opposed to the house of France, because it was debasing the papacy and because it was working against that Holy Roman Empire which meant so much to Dante during the time when this passage must have been written. He may have already composed his *De Monarchia*, although this is of slight bearing on the case. Still Dante, while holding to his theoretical date of 1300, was not averse to looking ahead and to utilizing his subsequent knowledge. Coming back to the time probably indicated in the passage under consideration; if we are to consider that the end of the canto marks the year 1305, then we must consider Dante's condition prior to that time. Even if his political importance has been unduly emphasized by some writers, it is nevertheless a fact that he took no inconsiderable part in the politics of Florence from 1298 to 1302. He may have gone to Rome in the Jubilee year; he may or may not have gone later as an ambassador to the pope; at all events, he steadfastly opposed the pretensions of the pope at Florence. For a time after his exile he worked with the Ghibellines, until he saw the hopelessness of the lines along which they were struggling.

Moreover, Dante took himself very seriously. He was a deep thinker, he held definite and healthy political views, and he knew it. He earnestly wanted these views to triumph, and he was insistent in expressing, and desirous of imposing, them, as is shown by his own words, and especially by his letters at the time of the descent of Henry of Luxemburg. Such a man occupies a large position in his own world—larger, perhaps, than in the world as seen by others.

With these ideas in view, and taking into consideration the explanations already proposed, may we not see in the harlot's turning her eyes upon Dante a tendency of the papacy to accept the political ideas advocated by him, and at least a movement toward them? Dante does not use a phrase which would indicate that much advance was necessarily made, simply *l'occhio a me rivolse*—a preparatory step, but one fraught with hopeful possibilities. Now, to what historical fact, or facts, can this refer?

If we accept the usual interpretation of the scourging as indicating the affair of Anagni, Dante evidently alludes to the facts which led up to it, which were as follows: Albert was elected emperor of Germany in 1298, and when Boniface VIII denied his right, asserting his own supremacy, Albert took up arms and compelled the archbishop of Mayence, a former ally of the pope, to make an alliance with him (Albert). This forced the pope's hand, and he soon came to an understanding with Albert, to whom he offered the headship of the Holy Roman Empire in 1303, in return for Albert's protection; also excommunicating Philip, with whom he had a serious quarrel. Philip then took immediate action in conjunction with the Colonna family and Boniface was arrested in Anagni.

That Dante looked upon "Alberto Tedesco" as a hope of the imperial party, and as the man that his own ideals demanded, is shown in the powerful appeal in *Purg.*, VI, 97-117; and any recognition of him by the papacy would be a step in the right direction. The news that Boniface had entered into an agreement with Albert, and would crown him emperor, would, therefore, seem to justify Dante's phrase—both in its personal and in its historical bearing. The question of Dante's theoretical equal

balance would be of importance ultimately; for the present it would be sufficient that the pope had broken away from France and had acknowledged the empire.

Some objection has been raised to considering the scourging as indicating the episode of Anagni. Whether this be considered valid or not (and it generally is not), it suggests another explanation for the words under consideration, and one which gives even a more personal interpretation to the *a me*.

It is clear that the harlot cannot typify Boniface VIII during the whole episode; for between his death and the removal of the papacy to Avignon two other popes had been chosen—Benedict XI and Clement V. There is, then, no reason why one of these others should not be referred to, if the circumstances permit of it. Indeed, it would be quite in consonance with the Dantesque structure, assuming that lines 151–53 referred to Boniface VIII, and lines 157–60 to Clement V, that the central *terzina* should refer to the central one of the popes of the period, Benedict XI. Let us examine the events of the short tenure of this pope.

On October 22, 1303, Niccolò Boccasino was elected pope, taking the name of Benedict XI. He was a just, conscientious, and holy man, desirous of bringing peace to the world, and of making the papacy what it should be—the source of peace and good-will. He found ample occasion near at hand in Rome and Florence, the two plague spots of Italian politics. Neglecting Rome, the conditions in Florence are well known. The Blacks were intrenched in power, and the Whites exiled. Desirous of reconciling the two factions, Benedict sent the cardinal Niccolò da Prato to Florence. While things promised well at first, and it looked as if the Whites might be allowed to return, the Ultra-Blacks precipitated matters, and the cardinal was forced to return to his master.

We know the importance that this had for Dante; we can imagine that it filled a large part in his thoughts for many days; and we have a remembrance of it in the much-discussed letter to the cardinal, Niccolò da Prato.¹ And yet apparently Dante has

¹ A late and full discussion as to the genuineness of this letter will be found in *Dante e Firenze*, Zenatti (Sansoni), pp. 343–430.

not indicated Benedict XI in the *Divina Commedia*, unless he refers to him here. The efforts of the papacy to effect the return of the banished Whites, of whom Dante considered himself not the least, would be precisely what we might expect to find mentioned here, and the personal element of the allusion would be even more applicable here than in the broader field of world-politics. In turning his eyes upon the banished Whites, the pope would be turning them upon Dante in person.

Will the rest of the *terzina* bear out this interpretation? What was the scourging from head to foot, the completest of punishments wreaked upon the papacy?

On July 7, 1304, Benedict died, of poison it is generally believed; and such was certainly the belief in Dante's day. So, when we find a contemporary chronicler, Ferreto di Vicenza, recording that Benedict XI died, poisoned by order of Philip of France, we have all necessary to complete this interpretation of Dante's phrase. Later historical research may or may not confirm the exactness of his assertion;¹ it is sufficient for us that it was current at the time. It may also be true that, if Benedict did die poisoned by Philip, the reason would be found rather in the political situation at Rome. But the pope's death, coming, as it did, about a month after the failure of the cardinal to pacify Florence, might well have been closely connected in Dante's mind with this attempted pacification, and would have been the completest of scourgings.

These two explanations are presented as suggestions for a closer and more personal interpretation of lines 154 and 155.

F. M. JOSSELYN, JR.

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¹ It does not seem to have been generally held as a fact, Ferreto being the only chronicler who asserts it. Cf. Gautier, *Benott XI* (Tours, 1876), pp. 222-27.